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ABSTRACT

An evaluation of a prekindergarten program was conducted to assess its merit and to assist in the formative revision of program activities. The program operated in a public elementary school in a rural area close to a metropolitan area. Classroom observations, telephone interviews with 25 parents, surveys of 2 elementary school teachers, and interviews with the prekindergarten staff provided evaluation data. Results indicate that the program enhances the social, emotional, and cognitive development of the students. Because only two elementary school teachers responded, their information was not used in final program evaluation. The parent surveys suggest a high degree of parent involvement and positive perceptions of parents about the program. The evaluation results will be presented to funding sources. The evaluation process provided several usable suggestions to improve the program, and it highlighted the need for more cooperation between the prekindergarten and the elementary school housing it. Two tables present study data. Appendixes contain the telephone questions for parents, the questions for program staff, and the teacher survey. (SLD)

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EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF A PRE-KINDERGARTEN
PROGRAM: CONCERNS FOR UTILIZATION

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Running Head: Utilization of Evaluation of Pre-
Kindergarten

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ABSTRACT

The evaluation of early childhood education programs is of timely importance since the field needs easily replicable models of successful programs and ideas for improving existing models. The purpose of this evaluation was to provide information designed to assess the merit and worth of a newly established program including the overall perceptions of the program held by the program staff and parents. In order to assist in the formative revision of program activities the evaluation gave clear recommendations and pointed out the aspects of the program that should not be changed.

The utilization of the evaluation had three concerns. First, the results of the evaluation could be presented to funding sources. Second, the program needed more cooperation from the elementary school housing the program. Third, the evaluation gave useable suggestions to improve the program.

Since early childhood education is a rapidly developing field, prekindergarten programs are receiving much attention in recent years. The literature is of immediate importance to school districts, parents and teachers who may be contemplating a local program. The field needs are twofold: 1) easily replicable models of successful programs (Decker, 1986); 2) ideas for improving existing models (Decker, 1986; Smith, 1989). Sharing the results of the evaluation of such programs can only enhance the field.

In evaluating the effectiveness of early education programs it should be recognized by many sources that early childhood education in general is effective for its purposes (Bee, 1989; Dunst, 1985; Mazoras and May, 1988), but the factors that contribute to the efficacy of one program may have little effect in the efficacy in another program (Bee, 1989; Casto and Mastropieri, 1986; Dunst, 1985). The resulting frustration can be alleviated if three important propositions are accepted. First, early intervention needs to be established if only because a societal need (such as children at-risk) once identified demands that some action be taken (Anastasiow, 1986). Second, a program identified as effective can be a standard, even if all its aspects cannot be modelled by others (Decker, 1986). Third, early childhood education is one field where top-down and bottom-up research meet (Decker, 1986; Smith, 1989).

The purpose of this evaluation of a pre-kindergarten was to provide information designed to assess the merit and

worth of the newly-established program. In this regard, the evaluation was aimed at identifying strengths, weaknesses, and overall perceptions of the program held by the program staff and parents. This was a general evaluation to be used to assist in the formative revision of program activities.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROGRAM

The prekindergarten is based in a public elementary school. The district is rural but close to a metropolitan area. A disproportionately high number of the children in the district are eligible for free lunch. There is little turn over of families in the district and several members of the same family may have attended the same school for several years. As such teachers and other school personnel are aware of family histories and situations.

The philosophy of the prekindergarten program focuses on the relationships which should exist among the child, teacher, parents, program and the school. This philosophy includes the recognition of each child as a unique individual who grows in four areas: social, emotional,, physical and cognitive. The program views 1) the parents as an active participant in the child's education, 2) the teacher as a professional who utilizes and integrates knowledge of language acquisition, learning theory, and early childhood development. The program philosophy is child-centered, designed to help children develop self-worth, curiosity, creativity, and respect for others in a stimulating, supportive environment where children are

encouraged to think for themselves, to observe, to question, to explore and discover.

This philosophy is realized in a free, open nature to the classroom. Parents are encouraged to visit and observe. The teacher has a structured curriculum but emphasizes self esteem and socialization. There is much music in the day's activities together with expressions of feelings and personal choice. The primary purpose of the program is to inspire children to "love school".

Evaluation Design: The evaluation questions were addressed through five major activities. The data collection included classroom observations, telephone interviews with parents, surveys of teachers, and interviews with program staff.

Results and Conclusions: A summary of the results is provided in Tables I and II. Conclusions will be summarized according to the evaluation questions.

Evaluation Question One: Is there any tentative information that the program enhances social, cognitive, and emotional development on the part of the children?

Insert Table I About Here.

Data collected from the parent interviews, staff interviews, and classroom observations indicate that the program enhances social, emotional, and cognitive development of the children. Parents confirmed these findings and were impressed with their children's progress.

Interviews with staff revealed a long term vision for the program.

Classroom observations uncovered a warm, loving environment, supportive of the child's own learning priorities and rate. The curriculum was age appropriate with clear objectives along a developmental continuum.

Recommendations resulting from this portion of the evaluation include the addition of a social worker and a speech therapist as part of the program staff. Additionally the program is in need of expanding the physical resources such as small manipulatives, puzzles, and educational software.

Evaluation Question Two: Do teachers in other levels of the elementary school perceive the program as aiding or hindering their own work?

As a result of the low response rate in this area of data collection, we have chosen not to analyze or present the data received in the effort to maintain the confidentiality of the two respondents. The fact that the majority of possible respondents chose not to return confidential surveys could be a matter of concern for the Prekindergarten Project Director and administration. It was suggested that an orientation regarding the program be conducted with all kindergarten and first grade teachers in the district.

The concern here for the evaluators was the development of an effective survey instrument. At first, it was thought

that a questionnaire with a five point Likert scale would be appropriate. However, in determining exactly what information was needed from the teachers a questionnaire with open ended questions seemed to be more applicable. The aversion to using an open ended survey revolved around worry that the teachers may discard the survey rather than risk losing anonymity in revealing negative feelings for the program. Using the open ended survey would undoubtedly result in more usable information, but brought with it the risk of not getting enough cooperation. The Likert scale survey would have been used more (it was quick to fill out; it offered high anonymity), but the information gleaned from it would probably not be as adequate as needed.

Evaluation Question Three: What types of communication takeplace between parents and program staff and how do parentsand program staff perceive this communication?

There are a variety of types of communication that take place between parents and program staff including the daily logs, planned personal meetings, home visits, telephone calls, and informal meetings. Parents have a very positive perception about the amount, the quality, and the quantity of communication that takes place between them and the program staff and school. This positive perception is shared by the program staff and school.

While both groups identified the daily logs as very useful, both saw areas for improvement. It is suggested that the logs be used as a weekly format for communication

in addition to the use of sturdier, uniform notebooks with pre-printed pages designed to enhance parent response. Other recommendations include a variation in scheduling of planned meetings, and provision for child-care during these meetings.

Insert Table II About Here.

COMMENTARY

The immediate utilization of the evaluation especially since the program was found to be a success, was needed by the sponsors for three reasons. First, the results of the evaluation could be presented to funding sources. Second, the program needed more cooperation from the elementary school housing the program. Third, the evaluation gave useable suggestions to improve the program.

The district when first conceiving the pre-kindergarten program sought funding from the state. One of the original purposes of the evaluation was to judge how closely the program followed the state's model. When state funding was denied the evaluation took on new importance to the district. The district had to assure a population of budget-slashing voters that this was a program that should not be disenfranchised. The voters had already rejected several bond issues. In general, the parents and the tax payers were quite active and concerned about school issues.

In house cooperation was also a major concern. The program in its first year enjoyed much support from the administration, but its second year would be under a new principal. Without a clear evaluation of effectiveness the program may not have had the continued support from the administration. Help from the kindergarten and first grade teachers was expected as an essential part of the philosophy of the pre-kindergarten program. That help could be more likely expected after the evaluation demonstrated the program to be valuable.

With the dedicated and creative personnel involved with the program new ideas for improvement were sure to emerge. The evaluation gave clear objectives to be met and pointed out the aspects of the program that should not be changed. The evaluation was a good starting point to present the program to stake holders such as the kindergarten and first grade teachers, whose help for improvement of the program was needed.

This program, of course, was shown to be effective, but even if it was not, the results of the evaluation should be made public. As the needs of pre-kindergarten programs become better known the various ways to meet these needs have to emerge. When the stake holders of an early childhood education program seek an external evaluation of their program they demonstrate that the program has the most essential ingredient: sincerity.

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TABLE 1

SUMMARY OF SOCIAL, COGNITIVE, EMOTIONAL EVIDENCE

	Parents <u>Percent of</u> <u>Responses</u>	Noted by Observers	Noted by Staff
<u>SOCIAL</u>			
a) Sharing/ getting along	60%	+	+
b) Plays better	44%	++	+
c) Loves School	44%	+	+
d) Sociable	24%	+	+
e) Became shy	12%	++	+
f) No change	8%	++	+
g) Hates School	4%	++	+
h) Adherence to schedule	*	+	+
<u>COGNITIVE</u>			
a) Knows letters	44%	+	+
b) Knows numbers	36%	+	+
c) Coloring better	20%	+	+
d) Knows colors	8%	+	+
e) Puts toys away	4%	+	+
f) Knows shapes	4%	+	+
g) Drawing better	4%	+	+
h) Writes name	4%	+	+
i) Reading readiness	4%	+	+
j) Recognize own names	*	+	+
k) "read" story book in unison.	*	+	+
<u>EMOTIONAL</u>			
a) More independent	16%	++	+
b) Improved speech	8%	++	+
c) Higher coordination	4%	++	+
d) Greater imagination	4%	++	+
e) More self esteem	4%	++	+
f) Accepts routine	4%	+	+
g) "time out" responded to quietly.	*	+	+

* These areas of evidence were collected from classroom observations rather than individual responses from parents or staff.

++ These areas required repeated observations that were not available.

Table 2

COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PARENTS AND STAFF

<u>Types of Communication</u>	<u>Perception of Communication</u>			Staff
	<u>Positive</u>	Parents <u>Negative</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	
Daily Logs	92%	4%	0%	Positive
Planned Personal Meetings	96%	4%	0%	Positive
Home Visits	36%	0%	0%	Valuable
Telephone Calls	40%	0%	0%	Useful
* Informal Meetings	96%	4%	16%	Positive
Communication between parents	26%	32%	16%	Need More

Total Number of
Respondents = 25

* Note: Parents gave more than one response; therefore the total is more than 100%.

Appendix A

The following general questions were included in the telephone interview to parents:

- Q1. What are some of the changes that you have noticed in your child since he/she has been in the Pre-K program?
- Q2. What are some of the things you are most happy with in the program? (If you had another child that was eligible to attend the program, would you send them?)
- Q3. Are there are things that you are unhappy about with regard to this program?
- Q4. Can you describe how you feel about your participation in this program?
- Q5. How would you describe communication between you and your child's teacher?
- How you describe the effectiveness of the Daily Logs?
- Q6. Why did you choose to put you child in this program?
- Q7. Have you visited your child's classroom? Describe this experience. If they answer yes, have they met with other parents?
- Q8. Does your child talk about school? If yes, what kinds of things are they saying?
- Q9. Are there any areas involving this program we have not touched upon? Are there any general comments you would like to make at this time?

Appendix B

General Questions Included in the Staff Interview

What is used for the assessment of the children?

What areas of development are being measured:

Are social, emotional, and cognitive measures used?

Is there a written class schedule that is followed?

Is there individualized teaching?

Can you describe a typical day in Pre-K class?

Would you describe the goal of the daily logs?

Would you describe this goal as being successfully attained?

How would you describe communication with parents?

Is there a link between special services and this program?

Is there a plan for easing transition into kindergarten?

What overall program changes would you like to see implemented?

What additional services would you like to see implemented, if possible?

What would you describe as the strongest aspects of this program?

What would you describe as the weakest aspect of the program?

What information would you like to have from the other teachers in the building?

ELEMENTARY TEACHER SURVEY

What do you think the major goals of a Pre-K program should be?

What do you perceive the major goals of the RCS Pre-K Program to be?

Which of these goals do you think the program is currently meeting?

What do you perceive the beneficial aspects of the RCS Pre-K Program to be in terms of kindergarten and first grade teaching? In other words, how will the Program enhance your work with next September's class?

What do you perceive the negative aspects of the Pre-K Program to be in terms of kindergarten and first grade teaching.? In other words, what types of problems with next September's class do you perceive occurring as a result of this year's Pre-K Program?

Would you like more information or contact with the Pre-K students and/or their activities? Is there anything that the program could do that would aid you in your work with students? Please specify.